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ABSTRACT

A study measured the effect of reading materials containing positive depictions of aging and the elderly on the attitudes of primary grade children toward aging and elderly adults. Subjects, 91 students from grades one to three enrolled in a Jacksonville, Florida public school, read stories selected from "aging/elderly positive" materials over a 6-week period and completed an attitude inventory before and after intervention. Results indicated that exposure to aging/elderly positive reading materials had a positive effect on the attitudes of students toward aging and the elderly. Negative stereotypes of aging and the elderly can be mitigated if teachers: (1) examine their own views of the elderly; (2) recognize that students come to school and to teachers with their views of life and of others already established; (3) understand the powerful influence of the media; (4) understand that the content of textbooks reflects the values, attitudes, and views of life and people held by the authors of the texts; and (5) incorporate reading materials which can enable children to develop more positive, realistic views of life and of other people. (Nine summaries of children's books which present positive images of aging and the elderly are included; 34 references and the attitude inventory are attached.) (RS)

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MITIGATING THE EFFECTS OF NEGATIVE STEREOTYPING OF AGING AND THE ELDERLY IN PRIMARY GRADE READING INSTRUCTION

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Abstract

Because negative images of aging and the elderly are presented to children through reading instructional materials, a study was undertaken to determine if exposure to "aging/elderly positive" materials would have a positive effect on the attitudes of primary grade children toward aging and the elderly. Based on the positive results, suggestions for instructional approaches and materials designed to enhance attitudes toward aging and the elderly are presented.

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MITIGATING THE EFFECTS OF NEGATIVE STEREOTYPING OF AGING AND THE ELDERLY IN PRIMARY GRADE READING INSTRUCTION

Introduction

America is aging. According to Census Bureau data, by July of 1984 the median age had risen to 31.2, up from 27.9 in 1970. Eleven percent of the total population is elderly--the highest proportion in the nation's history. Between 1970 and 1982, the population over age 65 rose 33 percent, to 27 million (Spain, 1983). Results of the 1990 census may well indicate further growth in the percentage of elderly in the population.

Ageism is a pervasive theme in American society. It can be defined as "a process of systematic stereotyping of and discrimination against people because they are old" (Butler, 1974, p. 11).

Children internalize and accept dominant stereotypes of the elderly at early ages often resulting in generally unpleasant images of growing old and the elderly.

Because the number of elderly persons in America is growing and a more positive image of aging and the elderly should be developing, and because basal readers play an important role during children's impressionable years, yet contain few positive depictions of aging and the elderly, this article sets out to inform readers about depictions of aging and the elderly found in present primary grade reading instructional materials, to describe the attitudes of primary grade students towards aging and the elderly, and to suggest instructional approaches and materials that can mitigate the effects of negative stereotyping of aging and the elderly in primary grade reading instruction.

Background

Attitudes Toward Aging and the Elderly

Gerontologists and others who study attitudes toward the aging process and the elderly consistently find negative stereotyping of the elderly by large segments of the American population (Harris, 1975; McTavish, 1971). Stereotyping is a routine means of dealing with a class of unfamiliar objects, in this case the elderly (Brubaker & Powers, 1976).

In a study by Serock, Seefeldt, Jantz and Galper (1977), findings indicate that most of 180 children (ages 3 to 11) questioned described the elderly in negative ways. They were seen as "wrinkled, short, and gray-haired," people who "chew funny," "don't go out much," "sit all day and watch TV in their rocking chairs," and "have heart attacks and die." In response to being asked about their feelings about growing old themselves, most indicated that they didn't want to do it.

Such stereotypes, which are often communicated by parents, teachers and peers, promote growth of ageism in children. Several studies have investigated the ways in which informal agencies of socialization, such as the mass media, support development of these dominant stereotypes.

The Media

Negative stereotyping of aging and the elderly is found in media of all varieties. Studies of Saturday morning television (Bishop & Krause, 1984), newspapers (Buchholz & Bynum, 1982), general television programming (Ansello, 1978), television commercials (Francher, 1973), adolescent literature (Peterson & Karnes, 1976), popular music (Kelly, 1982), novels (Loughan,

1977; Clearwater, 1982), and magazine cartoons (Smith, 1979) find the elderly depicted in a negative way, relegated to minor roles, or not depicted at all.

The media reflect symbolically the attitudes and values held by society. By reflecting the images, ideals and values of society, the media also aid in creating reinforcing and maintaining them. So the symbols of the elderly and aging found in the media reflect the dominant stereotypes held by society about the elderly and aging.

Stereotypes are categorizations, and they often become the basis for human action regardless of their objective validity or lack of it. The infrequency of the symbols and categorizations of old age, their portrayal in trivial terms, or the failure to represent them at all have potential significance for the creation or maintenance of negative stereotypes. Tuchman (1978) calls this pattern of symbolization symbolic annihilation.

The elderly, as objects of symbolic annihilation, appear as partial people, they are not developed, and they are only tangential to the mainstream of life around them.

Tuchman (1978) suggests that as particular social categories become more important as a market, the negative imagery applied to them tends to disappear. It should follow, then, that as larger numbers of Americans become elderly and more important as a market, less negative imagery should appear in media of all types, and since the media reflect symbolically the attitudes and values held by society, a more positive general attitude toward aging and the elderly should emerge.

Reading Instructional Materials

The first written materials that many young children in America experience are the basal readers used in reading instruction. Basal readers are the most commonly used reading instructional materials in the primary grades (Burmeister, 1983). Just as several generations of children came to know Dick and Jane intimately, today's children often come to identify with the characters found in the basal readers. It's not just the characters that come across to the children, however; the images, values and ideals of society come through, too.

Robin (1977) found a serious misrepresentation of age groups in her study of elementary school readers. A definite absence of meaningful characterizations of old people was reported by Ansello (1977) in his study of children's literature.

Meadows and Fillmer (1987) compared the content of five basal reading series published in the 1960s and 1980s in terms of the way in which the elderly were portrayed. While they found a generally positive portrayal of the elderly in both sets of materials, they did report an underrepresentation of the elderly in comparison to their actual proportion in the population.

In a study of 844 primary characters in 298 stories from the primary grade (K-3) basal reading materials of two major publishers, Gutknecht (1987) found only 6.6% were elderly. This is comparable to the findings of Serra and Lamb (1984) who reported that only 6.8% of 1,036 basal reader stories (K-6) discussed or included elderly characters.

While Gutknecht found that only 2.1% of the total number of human characters which could be assigned positive or negative

portrayals (569) were elderly negative, 20% of the elderly primary characters were portrayed negatively. While 20.5% of the total number of statements made about age groups (91) were negative statements about the elderly, 61.5% of the statements made about the elderly were negative.

From this study it can be concluded that the elderly appear far to infrequently as primary characters in basal reader stories, given the increasing number of elderly in society. Further, disproportionate numbers of elderly characters are portrayed in a negative manner, and far too many negative statements are made about the elderly in basal reading materials.

The Effect of Positive Depictions of Aging and the Elderly

In order to measure the effect of reading materials containing positive depictions of aging and the elderly on the attitudes of primary grade students toward aging and toward elderly adults, a study was undertaken involving 91 subjects from grades 1 to 3 in a Jacksonville, Florida public school.

Following the administration of an inventory designed to measure the attitudes of the subjects toward aging and the elderly, stories from selected "aging/elderly positive" materials were read to the students by the teachers and/or read by the students themselves. (See Appendix) This intervention lasted for a six week period after which the attitude inventory was administered once again. Demographic data were gathered on all subjects.

Results and Discussion

Although not originally planned, a cross-grade control group of 25 subjects emerged who received no exposure to the aging/elderly positive stories. Reasons for the emergence of this group included absences from school and participation in other school activities during the intervention period.

In order to determine the effect of the intervention on the attitude students have toward aging and the elderly, analysis of covariance was computed. An F of 3.894 was computed and with 4 and 74 degrees of freedom was found to be significant at the .002 level. The attitude inventory pretest, posttest and adjusted posttest means along with the number of stories to which each group was exposed are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Exposure, Attitude Pretest, Posttest and Adjusted Posttest Means

Group/Exposure	Pretest	Posttest	Adjusted Posttest
1 (Control)	13.2	11.35	10.74
2 (1-4)	11.43	13.75	14.08
3 (5-8)	12.47	14.29	14.19
4 (9-12)	11.77	12.35	12.49
5 (12+)	11.23	12.69	13.12

In each of the four groups receiving the intervention--exposure to aging/elderly positive stories--there was a positive gain in mean attitude scores for the students. The control group had a lower posttest mean than their pretest mean. Although there was a positive gain in all the groups receiving

intervention, exposure to a higher number of stories did not increase the positive attitudes of students more than exposure to fewer stories.

It is clear from the results of this study that exposure to aging/elderly positive reading materials can have a positive effect on the attitude of students toward aging and the elderly. Unfortunately, few aging/elderly positive stories are found in the reading instructional materials encountered by most primary grade children. In fact, it was difficult to locate and prepare such materials for this study.

It should be noted that young children's perception of aging and the elderly is not clear. They can view anyone who is older than them, such as their parents, as being elderly. In fact, when questioned, some subjects indicated that elderly people were those over 220 years old.

This study clearly suggests that a compilation of aging/elderly positive stories to be used in a supplemental way and/or inclusion of such stories in basal reading instructional materials could provide students with a means of developing more positive attitudes toward aging and the elderly.

Instructional Approaches

The following suggestions provide teachers with an instructional perspective from which negative stereotypes of aging and the elderly can be mitigated.

First, teachers need to examine their own views of life and others, so that, if stereotypic or biased perspectives are found, care is taken to ensure that teacher-held stereotypes or biases

are not communicated to children.

Then teachers need to reflect on their students. Children's attitudes and values are products of their environments. Their self-concepts are formed through interaction with their environments and with significant others, such as parents, siblings, teachers, and peers. Such interaction can have an effect on the development of their attitudes and values. This effect can lead to the development of positive or negative life views, including the way in which they view others.

In other words, children come to school and to teachers with views of life and of others already established. Schools and teachers need to accept children as they are, whatever their previous experiences, whatever their attitudes and values, whatever their views of others and of life.

Next, teachers must understand the powerful influence of the media, which of course includes reading materials which children use in school. While television may have been the predominant media in children's lives prior to entering school, the vast amounts of print media, including basal readers, to which children are exposed in school are also very powerful in terms of shaping children's attitudes, values, and views of life and other people. Week after week, month after month, year after year, through reading, discussing, memorizing, and testing, the images of life and of people and events found in textbook materials leave their mark on children.

Teachers must understand that the content of textbooks, including basal readers, reflects the values, attitudes, beliefs, and views of life and people held by the authors of the texts.

These, too, are based on their interactions with life and with people. It has been shown that the content of text materials often contains negative images of aging and the elderly. These images become part of the meaning communicated from writer to reader.

When materials containing such negative stereotypes and biases must be used, the following suggestions can be helpful in reducing the effect of such content. Find out children's prior knowledge and beliefs about life and others, in this case the elderly, before reading the story. Assist children in considering why and to whom the author is writing and the social and environmental setting in which the author operated. Give students the opportunity to evaluate their own ideas and beliefs, to consider the viewpoints of others, and to recognize the influence of their own past experiences and their reasons for reading on their understanding of the text.

Finally, when teachers find that the content of required reading instructional materials presents stereotypic or biased views of the elderly, or for that matter women, minorities, and/or cultural settings, which could affect children's views of life and people, supplemental materials which can enable children to develop more positive, realistic views of life and of other people must be incorporated into reading instruction.

Aging/Elderly Positive Materials

Recognizing the need for supplemental materials for primary grade children which depict a positive image of the elderly, Carolyn Baynham, as part of her master's thesis work at the

University of North Florida, compiled a bibliography of 72 primary children's books and nine short stories that show a positive image of the elderly (1987). In addition to examining numerous reference books which categorize and review children's books, and various journals and magazines for teachers, she solicited suggestions from 35 organizations which deal with the elderly population and 35 randomly selected publishers.

Following are summaries of several children's books which teachers may find useful in presenting positive images of aging and the elderly to primary grade children.

In The Old Woman and the Rice Thief, Betsy Bang (1978) portrays an older woman as clever, quick-witted and intelligent as she outsmarts a rice thief.

Ron Brooks' story of Timothy, who has no brothers or sisters and doesn't like school, in Timothy and Gramps (1978), shows how school becomes more enjoyable after Gramps visits the classroom for show and tell.

An elderly woman is shown as knowledgeable in The Kid's Cat Book by Tomie de Paola (1979) when Patrick goes to Granny Twinkle's for a free kitten and learns everything there is to know about cats.

In Tomie de Paola's Watch Out for Chicken Feet in Your Soup (1974), Joey is embarrassed to take a friend to visit his grandmother because she has a house full of funny old stuff and she has an accent. But Joey begins to appreciate her more when he finds out how well she and his friends get along.

Grady's grandfather is portrayed as intelligent, creative

and sensitive when he fixes Grady's teddy bear "better than new" after it was ruined by a young cousin. This Barbara Douglass story, Good As New (1982), also conveys a loving and positive relationship between the boy and his grandfather.

Grandma Is Somebody Special, Susan Goldman's book, shows a grandmother who lives in a tall apartment building in a big city, who works, goes to school, tends house, and does very interesting things with her visiting granddaughter (1976).

In Howard Knotts' Great-Grandfather, the Baby and Me (1978), the great-grandfather's reminiscence about traveling for miles across sparsely settled Canadian prairie to see a new baby helps a young boy deal with his own apprehension about meeting his new baby sister.

Granny uses her gun that doesn't shoot to capture two desperadoes in Granny and the Desperadoes by Peggy Parish (1970). By the time the sheriff arrives, Granny has the bandits helping with the household chores, repairing the roof, and providing a supply of meat and eggs.

Barbara Williams, in her book, Kevin's Grandma (1975), shows a grandmother riding a motorcycle, giving judo lessons, and scuba diving.

While these stories and others like them present aging/elderly positive images and positive intergenerational relationships, more stories are needed which show the elderly in positive productive roles. More members of each succeeding cohort to turn 65 years of age are in better health, more highly educated, in a better financial position, and more continue to be employed than in previous groups. This needs to be reflected in

stories for children.

Conclusion

Evidence presented above clearly shows that the content of children's reading materials doesn't only reflect the images and values of society, but also aids in creating, reinforcing and maintaining negative stereotypes of aging and the elderly. Classroom teachers and publishers of reading instructional materials can mitigate the effects of negative stereotyping of the elderly through the use of aging/elderly positive materials thereby helping children develop more positive attitudes toward the elderly. Inclusion of stories like those described, either as supplemental materials or actually in basal readers, will enhance the images of aging and the elderly developed by young children.

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Appendix

INVENTORY

Attitudes Toward Old People and Growing Old

Yes No 01. Most old people have poor memories and are often confused.

Yes No 02. Hearing, seeing, smelling, tasting and feeling become poorer as people get older.

Yes No 03. Most older people don't sleep together.

Yes No 04. People have a hard time breathing as they get older.

Yes No 05. Old people feel miserable most of the time.

Yes No 06. People lose their strength as they get older.

Yes No 07. Most old people live in places like nursing homes or homes for the aged.

Yes No 08. Older drivers have fewer accidents per person than younger drivers.

Yes No 09. Most older workers cannot work as well as younger workers.

Yes No 10. Most elderly people are healthy enough to carry out their normal activities.

Yes No 11. Most old people are set in their ways and are unable to change.

Yes No 12. Most old people do not learn new things very fast.

Yes No 13. It is almost impossible for old people to learn new things.

Yes No 14. Most old people react slower than younger people.

Yes No 15. Most old people are pretty much the same.

Yes No 16. Most old people are always busy.

Yes No 17. Most old people are alone and lonely.

Yes No 18. Most old people don't have accidents at work.

Yes No 19. There are more old people now than ever before in the United States.

Yes No 20. Most doctors think it's more important to take care of younger people before older people.

Yes No 21. Most old people are poor.

Yes No 22. Most old people are working or would like to be working.

Yes No 23. As people get older, they believe more in God.

Yes No 24. Most old people never get upset or angry.

Yes No 25. In twenty (20) years, old people will live almost the same way old people live now.